

Raising Awareness of English Syllables and Their Stress Patterns for Improved Pronunciation Through the Use of Poetry and Popular Songs

Scott W. Smith

This paper addresses the difficulties that Japanese students of English (JSE) face in improving their English pronunciation and intelligibility. Because Japanese is a mora-timed language and English a stress-timed one, the concepts that underlie pronunciation across the two languages is sufficiently different to make intelligible pronunciation problematic for JSE. Helping students understand the concepts that form the structure of English pronunciation is vitally important in helping them achieve a high level of intelligibility and improved pronunciation. I will attempt to show how a knowledge of suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation (syllables, stress, rhythm and intonation) are crucial to a deeper understanding of how English works, and contrast that with more traditional segmental aspects (phonemes) which students are often presented with as being sufficient to master the English sound system. The use of poetry and popular songs will be explored as a vehicle to achieve exposure to natural sounding English and also to allow a method of practice in a situation where actual communicative encounters are limited for students. In addition I will show how these methods can be highly motivational and enjoyable forms of engagement in English for students, that will encourage them to achieve their goals of better pronunciation skills and more intelligible spoken English.

Introduction

Pronunciation in a foreign language is a thorny issue. Despite students' best efforts to understand the grammar, vocabulary and pragmatics of a language, if they do not feel confident in actually enunciating what they want to say, and in being understood, then it can be a very negative and frustrating experience. How should students and teachers alike approach this aspect of learning a foreign language (L2)? What should the pronunciation goals of a language student be? What aspects of pronunciation should students be aware of and how should they go about building pronunciation practice into their lives so as to achieve their goals of more fluent sounding pronunciation?

Accent

The first important issue concerning pronunciation of an L2, is that of having a foreign accent. Once students have passed a certain age, it seems difficult for them to be able to achieve natural and native-like pronunciation in a foreign language (Asher and Garcia, 1969). The age at which this ability is lost varies amongst individuals but is generally considered to be around the onset of puberty. This suggests that students and teachers must be prepared to accept that a foreign accent is inevitable for most students. However, research shows that there is a great variety of scope within the non-native pronunciation range and that effort and motivation are key factors in attaining a better level of pronunciation in the L2 (Gilakjani, 2011). Because of this apparent inability of students to attain a native-like ability in pronunciation skills and perhaps also because teachers do not have a clear understanding of pronunciation aspects and a knowledge of how best to teach those features, often teachers decide not to spend much time on pronunciation

in class as a feature of language study (Fraser, 1999). Linguistic journals and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) texts do not give more than cursory attention to pronunciation, if at all (Derwing and Monroe, 2005). If teachers are not sure about the effectiveness of teaching pronunciation then it will not be surprising if students themselves may not consider it to be so important, especially if they are not using the target language on a daily basis and are therefore able to see that pronunciation affects not only their ability to be understood, but also their listening skills, as well as their social standing within the target-language culture.

Intelligibility

The idea of intelligibility for second language learners (SLL) is also of vital importance. Given that students will most likely not be able to achieve perfect pronunciation in the L2, they need to understand that despite this they can still achieve perfectly intelligible language and that this should be the goal of any attention to pronunciation study. The question for the SLL must be how to achieve intelligibility and how closely they should attempt to copy the pronunciation of a native speaker. In the case of English, it is also pertinent to consider that there are many different types of standard pronunciation depending on the geographical regions where it is spoken as a native language. From the UK's Received Pronunciation to America's General American English, through Canada, New Zealand and Australia there are several versions of accent that can all claim to be standard versions. Beyond that there are several countries where English is spoken as a lingua franca where accents are markedly different again. How is it feasible to teach one type of pronunciation over another? What should be taught is the features common to all of these.

Linguistic background

The languages of the world are separated by many different factors. It is important to understand the features, idiosyncrasies and differences between languages when attempting to study them. Many features about our own language are merely unconscious assumptions that we have no need to analyze because of the fluency and ease with which we communicate and comprehend our native tongue. When attempting to learn another language however, we bump up against difficulties that seem unfathomable to us. We begin to see that language is a highly complex, interlocking system with rules, exceptions, complicated grammar, speech acts, idioms, polite language, slang, things going out of fashion and others coming in, strange concepts, pronunciation problems and a never-ending stream of difficult things to remember.

English

One of the factors most commonly discussed when talking about different kinds of language, is language families. A language family is a group of languages with a common ancestor language. In the case of the language family that English belongs to, namely the Germanic languages, this is Proto-Germanic, which is itself a branch of the Indo-European languages. Within language families there are common features of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that vary in some ways from one language to another whilst maintaining some kind of similarity. English belongs to a subset of Germanic languages known as the West Germanic language family, which includes German, Dutch, Afrikaans, Yiddish, Frisian and Luxembourgish. West Germanic is closely related to North Germanic, which includes the languages of Scandinavia. English, like all Germanic languages, is said to belong to the

stress-timed group of languages where vowel length can vary considerably within utterances depending on certain concrete rules but also for reasons of prosody. The act of employing stress to vowels within syllables means that vowels are emphasized and elongated without the meaning changing. English also employs the correlated use of unstressed and reduced vowels within utterances for contrast with stressed vowels. This results in a rhythm of strong and weak sounds as stressed, unstressed and reduced vowels form a pattern. For Japanese listeners these can be confusing features to understand and especially to replicate in speech.

English also contains loan words from French and Latin that together make up more than 50% of the lexicon of English. It might even be better to say that English is a kind of hybrid of Germanic and Romance languages, although the grammatical structure betrays its origin of the Germanic type with the influence of the Romance languages mostly limited to vocabulary. It has even been suggested that English grammar too may be a kind of hybrid, but this time with the Celtic languages existing in Britain before the influx of Germanic speakers (McWhorter, 2009). This means that any student from a country whose mother tongue is from Germanic, Romance or Celtic languages has a head start in understanding and learning English because of similar grammatical features, vocabulary items and pronunciation and those from other linguistic backgrounds will find it harder.

Japanese

Japanese on the other hand is usually considered an isolate whose origins are shrouded in mystery. Despite some similarities grammatically between it and Korean, they are usually classified as not belonging to the same family. Some researchers have suggested a connection with both Japanese and Korean and the Altaic languages of Turkic, Mongolic and Tungusic languages,

although this is disputed. In the same way that large proportions of the vocabulary of English are derived from French and Latin however, Japanese has a host of loan words from Chinese, whilst the grammar remains markedly different. In addition, with regard to pronunciation, Japanese and Chinese exhibit very different phonology and timing.

Japanese is a mora-timed language, which is similar to syllable-timed with subtle differences. Morae are units of timing that in some cases are considered smaller units than syllables. Taking the name of the capital city of Japan, *Tokyo*, as an example, the pronunciation can be said to have two syllables, but four mora. Written phonetically in the correct Japanese mora-timed version it becomes to-u-kyo-u. Each mora in Japanese has the same length and strength of pronunciation as all of the others and Japanese speakers are therefore extremely sensitive to timing of sound denoting meaning. *Tokyo* does not sound the same to Japanese ears if any morae are omitted. In this way, within Japanese there are countless cases where mora number determines units of different meaning. For example the word *kosho* can mean old book, break-down or negotiation depending on whether mora are present or absent: ko-sho, ko-sho-u and ko-u-sho-u respectively.

However, because of this mora-timed aspect of Japanese, what usually occurs when pronouncing foreign words is that they are shoehorned into the Japanese phonetic system and consequently take on pronunciation that often bears only cursory acknowledgement to the original pronunciation in the foreign language. As an example of this, one only has to think of some well-known product names that have become part of the Japanese language to realize the complexity of the problem. *Coca Cola*, each word of which is two syllables in English, the first in each word containing a stressed vowel and the second reverting to a reduced vowel. In Japanese, the mora number is two for *Coca*; ko-ka, and 3 for *Cola*; ko-u-ra. The ubiquitous *McDonald's*, being three syllables of reduced-stressed-reduced vowels in English becomes in

Japanese a surprising six mora; ma-ku-do-na-ru-do. This shows how the Japanese phonetic system determines how foreign words are generally treated, and how difficult it is for Japanese students to adapt to such a different system as English.

Consequently, concerning the respective vocabulary, grammar and speech patterns of both English and Japanese, there is virtually no historical overlap between the two. It is true to say however that Japanese has taken on many loan words from English in the one hundred and fifty years to the present that Japan has been in contact with English-speaking cultures and especially since the end of the Second World War. There is therefore at least a superficial familiarity with English words for Japanese students. However, grammatically, lexically and in pronunciation and timing aspects, these two languages are about as different as languages can become.

Phonemes

In addition to this considerable problem, the phonemes of Japanese and those of English have some similar sounds but are often subtly or completely different. The basic unit of Japanese phonemes is five vowels and 17 consonant phonemes, verses 20 vowels in English and 24 consonant phonemes (Kavanagh, 2007). For JSE this means that there are many phonemes in English which are not recognizable to the Japanese ear. It is an important point for the language teacher to remember and for the student to understand that when adults hear phonemes that are not represented in their own language, their inherent concepts of speech pigeonhole those sounds into the most similar sounds they are familiar with. Thus, for example *thank you* will become sa-n-kyu-u in Japanese. Because Japanese speakers have no concept of a th (θ) sound in their understanding of language, there is no way that they can actually hear a difference and are indeed unaware that they are

applying their Japanese-language concepts to English (Fraser, 2006).

Syllables

Syllables are the basic unit of English rhythm. The Oxford Living Dictionary describes a syllable as:

A unit of pronunciation having one vowel sound, with or without surrounding consonants, forming the whole or a part of a word; for example, there are two syllables in water and three in inferno.

For JSE this can be a very strange concept in comparison with Japanese mora which are always either a vowel or a consonant or a vowel consonant pair. The concept of having vowel clusters around a vowel, as one syllable, such as the English word *plump*, is very difficult for them to grasp, let alone pronounce. The transliteration into mora-style Japanese would be pu-ra-n-pu, which by English standards would translate back into four syllables!

Stress

A vitally important aspect of English pronunciation for JSE is the concept of stress. On the level of individual lexical units (words), stressed vowels operate in tandem with unstressed and reduced vowels within syllables to create the rhythm and flow of English. All words in English with more than two syllables exhibit a combination of stressed and unstressed or reduced syllables. The system by which this is determined seems almost impossible to keep in mind for the student as it involves rules about stressed syllables within different parts of speech or word endings. Whilst this can be instructive it often demotivates the student because they feel that they cannot remember all of the rules and will never be able to master English

pronunciation. It is important to help students understand how stress works in English without demotivating them, and by giving them a window into developing an 'ear' for what speech is like in itself (Fraser, 2006).

Raising awareness

Raising awareness of all of these issues is important for the metalinguistic knowledge of all language students. All too often students are introduced to English pronunciation through the bare phonetic system without attention being paid to the suprasegmentals that underlie them. Teachers often do not know how to approach these issues with confidence and therefore rely on a kind of linguistic osmosis to take place whereby students will be able to speak and understand English with just a knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and phonemes to guide them. Unfortunately this often results in stilted speech and a resignation to the impossibility of ever being able to communicate successfully in English and the subsequent demotivation to try. Students must be introduced to these concepts of language that differ so significantly from their own in order for them to grasp what it is they have been missing.

The role of poetry and popular song

Poetry and popular songs can be a springboard into the world of English pronunciation for the students trying to come to terms with spoken English and its pronunciation. Once the conceptual groundwork of English has been hinted at, teachers can take their students into the world of spoken English recordings to allow students to hear real English, spoken in understandable chunks with real and even exaggerated stress and rhythm.

Poetry in English exists in many structural forms, from precise syllabic construction with regular rhythm and rhyme, to unstructured free verse. To

begin with, teachers can introduce poetic constructions that are simple and formulaic to demonstrate how stressed, unstressed and reduced vowels work. The following children's poem demonstrates how this works:

The moon

The moon is washing windows,

Dancing off the glass,

Resting on the praying trees

And painting the sleeping grass.

Richard Macwilliam

Here is an example of a poem that contains words that are all easy to understand. The rhythm lends itself to a simple tempo, which is easy to repeat. There are examples of reduced vowels in the numerous definite articles and examples of how stress works across words with regard to content and function, so that in the first line *the* and *is* are function words and as such are unstressed or reduced vowels, whereas *moon*, *trees* and *grass* are content words and as such are stressed. It also demonstrates many two-syllable words with similar stress patterns of stressed syllables followed by unstressed ones. If an emphasis is placed by the teacher on the fun and imagery of the poem, this can clearly be an enjoyable and tension-free way to approach all aspects of English pronunciation. Also, it is short enough to be easily memorized and practiced at home. With the ubiquity of the internet and the consequent availability of material, it is easy for the teacher to find recordings of such poems or songs for their students, which can be listened to through a smartphone or computer so that a student is not reliant on obtaining their own recording, which allows access to thousands of similar, practicable snippets of naturally spoken language.

Expansion exercises can easily be developed. An extremely motivational activity can be creating similar poems according to a complementary structure. In this poem's particular case, the rhythm of the syllables is approximately:

Line 1: 7 syllables

Line 2: 5 syllables

Line 3: 7 syllables

Line 4: 7 syllables squeezed into the rhythm of 5

The teacher might limit the structure to the same number of syllables with a structural guideline of say:

The _____ is _____ ing _____
_____ ing (preposition) the _____
_____ ing (preposition) the _____ ing _____
And _____ ing _____

So that a student might produce something like:

The dog is eating dinner,
Sitting on the floor,
Looking at the sleeping cat,
And wanting to chase it more.

This gives the student something creative to engage in whilst thinking about syllabic unity and stress structure. This can then be part of a student presentation.

Poems can thus be found that present language in straightforward ways and once students are familiar with the format, they can be encouraged to

attempt more and more complicated work, until quite complicated pieces can be attempted. Here is a slightly more complicated one:

Be proud of who you are

I come with no wrapping or pretty pink bows,
I am who I am, from my head to my toes.
I tend to get loud when speaking my mind,
Even a little crazy some of the time.
I'm not a size 5 and don't care to be,
You can be you and I can be me.
I try to stay strong when pain knocks me down,
And the times that I cry are when no one's around.
To error is human or so that's what they say,
Well tell me who's perfect anyway.

S. Paine

Syllabically this is very simple, with very few multi-syllabic words. The challenge in this poem is to pick up on the rhythmic aspect of it and to separate out content and function words to create the harmony. The best part about this poem is its motivational aspect. It challenges the reader to think about their own set of values and what is meaningful and special about themselves and their lives. So, it connects on an emotional level, which engages the reader through sound, rhythm and meaning.

Popular songs work in the same way as this. The advantage of songs is that generally young people tend to be emotionally attached to certain songs or artists or can become so through exposure. This creates ideal motivation to work carefully with the material. The obvious difference is that songs are

sung rather than spoken. This can be an advantage though because generally speaking, songs exaggerate stress, rhythm and rhyme and so the same dynamic is at work. In singing, unstressed and reduced vowels are often given even less space than spoken English so that a rhythmical and pleasurable cadence is achieved. This is excellent practice for the student. Song lyrics can also be spoken at regular speed to practice natural pronunciation.

Here is a Lennon and McCartney song that captures the cadence of spoken English in a compelling and meaningful song:

Yesterday

Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away.
Now it looks as though they're here to stay.
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be.
There's a shadow hanging over me.
Oh, yesterday came suddenly.

Why she had to go?
I don't know, she wouldn't say.
I said something wrong.
Now I long for yesterday.

Yesterday love was such an easy game to play.
Now I need a place to hide away.
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Why she had to go?

I don't know, she wouldn't say.

I said something wrong.

Now I long for yesterday.

Yesterday love was such an easy game to play.

Now I need a place to hide away.

Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Mm mm mm mm mm mm mm.

Lennon-McCartney

The language of the lyrics is simple and easy to understand, it is a compelling song of palpable emotion and sentiment. Any young person will be able to empathize with the protagonist and enjoy the experience of listening to such a moving piece of music.

The paucity of input

For most JSE, the most obvious drawback to improving pronunciation is in the lack of input of natural spoken English in their lives from which to learn. An important part of improving pronunciation apart from understanding the mechanics and mental concepts is to listen and copy. If there is a lack of opportunity, the mental processes by which a person hears a sound, understands it and is able to copy it, will atrophy and decay (Krashen 1988). By providing students with comprehensible input, especially with the availability to most students today of multiple types of natural English through the Internet, that lack of opportunity can be largely

addressed.

Practice

Students need practice. They need to listen to natural spoken English and to copy and pronounce words until they have achieved a higher level of pronunciation and understanding. This is not a spontaneous phenomenon whereby suddenly students can speak beautiful English, and this must be emphasized in classrooms. Of course, practice can occur in classroom situations, either as a class as a whole or in smaller groups, however the most important practice must occur when the student is relaxed and unselfconscious and can focus clearly on the task at hand. Emphasis must therefore be placed on the importance of self-practice for achieving better pronunciation. Students should be encouraged to work alone, listening and trying their own versions. This essential practice creates the necessary mental awareness of correct pronunciation. It also builds confidence in the student because as they develop their abilities they also develop their self-belief.

Conclusion

Japanese and English are very different languages. Concerning pronunciation awareness and knowledge, it is important that students become aware of the full range of what constitutes pronunciation in the L2. In the case of JSE, this means working beyond just the mechanics of the segmental, phonemic aspects of consonants and vowels and moving into the equally important suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation; syllables, stress, rhythm and intonation. This will allow the student to change their concepts of how English is pronounced and by doing so to develop an 'ear' for the music of

English.

Using poetry and popular songs will allow students the necessary meaningful input of language that they lack in their everyday lives. It will also engage them emotionally and intellectually and provide them with the platform from which to practice their pronunciation in a safe and stress-free environment.

The availability of material on the Internet should be utilized to maximum effect. No longer can the student complain that they don't have the opportunity of hearing enough natural language to benefit them.

However, the truth of the matter is that students can only be shown how to achieve proficiency in an L2. They cannot be forced to be good at language any more than they can be forced to be good at sports or to play a musical instrument. I hope though that this paper has shown that there are ways of making studying more enjoyable and meaningful and that students can be offered the opportunity to improve their L2 pronunciation in real terms.

References

- Asher, J. J., & Garcia, R. (1969). The Optimal Age to Learn a Foreign Language. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 53, Issue 5, 334-341.
- Derwing, T. M., & and Monroe, M. J. (2005). Second Language Accent and Pronunciation Teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 39, Issue 3, 379-397.
- Fraser, H. (1999). ESL Pronunciation Teaching: Could it be More Effective? *Presented at the ALAA Conference, Perth*.
- Fraser, H. (2006). Helping Teachers Help Students With Pronunciation: A Cognitive Approach. *Prospect* Vol. 21, No. 1.
- Gilakjani, A. P. (2011). A Study on the Situation of Pronunciation Instruction in ESL/EFL Classrooms. *Journals of Studies in Education*, Vol. 1, No.1, 1-15.
- Kavanagh, B. (2007). The Phonemes of Japanese and English – A Contrastive Study -. *青山保健大雑誌* 8 (2), 283-292.
- Krashen, Stephen D. (1988). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Prentice-Hall International.
- Lennon-McCartney. (1965) Yesterday. From the album *Help!* London, EMI.

- McWhorter, J. (2009). *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*. (pp. 60-61). New York: Penguin Random House.
- Macwilliam, R. Short Poems for Kids. Retrieved from richardmacwilliam.com Paine, S. Short and Simple Poems. Retrieved from familyfriendpoems.com
- The Oxford Living Dictionary, (2018). Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/syllable> Oxford University Press.